



WORK HARD, PLAY HARDER

*Celebrating 50 years as a self-made entrepreneur, **Sir Richard Branson** explains why he'll never retire – and why he's still passionate about making a difference*

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The prospect of meeting Sir Richard Branson leaves me with something of a conundrum, as it must anyone lucky enough to steal some of his time. Even though I have no unique business proposition to offer, I still feel compelled to pitch something to him, *anything*, rather than miss this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Alas, after wracking my brain for the entire night, my notebook is still empty the next day.

Still I figure, he's probably relieved not to have another hair-brain idea thrown his way? Not so.

'I'll never tire of meeting those people who are looking to disrupt the norm, to improve people's lives and change the world for the better,' he says. 'I approach each of these situations with a great sense of optimism and always try to add some positive feedback, whether that's through encouragement, advice or even investment. I'm an entrepreneur first, so am always interested to hear new ideas, whether being pitched to me on a plane, on a bike or over a meal.'

So when my lightbulb moment does eventually occur, I ask, what should I do?

'My advice to any entrepreneur who is pitching their business idea is to keep it clear, show your strengths and explain what's in it for your potential partners.'

FAMILY GUY

Indeed, Richard's latest venture, Virgin Sport, was borne out of his son-in-law, Freddie, presenting the proposal to him a few years ago.

'I was just off the back of the Cape Argus marathon, a gruelling 120km bike ride across Cape Town's mountains, when he came up with the



idea of a sports event that not only catered for enthusiasts but for their friends and families, too. No one had ever tried it before and I was so tired from cycling up the steep hills that I said 'yes!'

Richard likes saying 'yes' but that doesn't mean to say he passes the onerous task of setting up a new Virgin business over to someone else. He's still very much at the forefront of all his companies and, despite being in Washington the day before and due in Barbados the day after, he still managed to fire the starting gun at the first Festival of Sport in Hackney earlier this year.

And, true to his word, it was indeed a family affair, as Richard's own children Holly and Sam were there, along with his four grandchildren.

'It was lovely for us all,' says Richard. 'We at Virgin are on a mission to get people moving, to break down barriers to participation and encourage everyone to get active. It's the start of an experiment and another opportunity to create a little bit of magic.'

STILL LEARNING

At the age of 66 – he's 67 this month – and despite being the only person in the world to build eight, billion-dollar companies in eight separate sectors, Richard still wants to make a difference.

'When I stop enjoying it, I'll stop doing it,' he says. 'After five decades, the reason I keep going is the same today as it was the day I started: To make a positive impact on people's lives. All businesses need to have this desire in their DNA to succeed. I'm inspired all the time, by everyone around me. I'm still learning even after 50 years of putting ideas in motion.'

The biggest lesson he's learned so far is that success is about you and I – 'dealing with people in a fun and friendly way.' He says. 'We spend roughly 80% of our waking lives working, so it's important we do what we love, and love what we do. Virgin prides itself on having people who like working there. They're totally committed and when positive values are instilled in your team, they feel empowered and encouraged.'

'A lot of companies say that of their colleagues, but we really live and breathe it. I can sleep well at night knowing the recent awful passenger incidents on other airlines would never, ever happen on a Virgin flight, because the team is imbued to genuinely care about other people.' [In April, Kentucky doctor David Dao was forcibly dragged off a United Airlines flight after he refused to give up his seat to employees of a partner airline after United overbooked the flight.]

WHAT THREE THINGS WOULD YOU LIKE TO CHANGE ABOUT THE WORLD?

1

GET SCHOOLS UP TO DATE

'I've never been one to hide my feelings on our current education system and I remain baffled that so little has changed in the last century. There are many subjects still taught on a daily basis which are of very little value to students. I hope more practical solutions are introduced to the education system by the time my grandchildren are attending school.'

2

KEEP IT SUSTAINABLE

'We must move to an economy that is powered by more renewable energy and where we can minimise the impact we are having on the world's resources and climate. The Paris climate change agreement and subsequent ratification by large nations, including China, was a profound moment in world history.'

3

GET WORLD'S PROBLEMS SOLVED

'I want to see more and more entrepreneurs working to solve the world's problems. We've seen a rise in this through our own not-for-profit, Virgin StartUp, which provides loans, mentorship and business advice to more than 1,800 entrepreneurs across the country. The world is full of problems waiting to be solved, entrepreneurs are those who keep their eyes and ears open and find great solutions on how to fix them.'

NO UPS WITHOUT DOWNS

That's not to say it's been plain sailing all the way. Richard has faced adversity and uphill struggles against huge corporations in his attempts to offer the public choice. He says: 'Perhaps my craziest idea was believing that by having one secondhand Boeing 747 I could take on British Airways with their 300 planes! We did it though, despite their dirty tricks campaign to bury not only the airline but the Virgin brand completely.'

'Athletes, runners, business people from all walks of life will have their downs. It's these downs which teach us most about our character.'

He continues: 'I try not to dwell on the failures in life; you must learn from them, but they can't become a weight around your neck holding you back. It's best to take all the positives you can from them and move on. I've had to do it a number of times, whether it's ballooning around the world or launching Virgin Cola, they've all taught me something which I've carried into my next project or business.'

As a born optimist, Richard can build on the positive, even when disaster strikes a venture at the 11th hour.

'We were about to open our first Virgin Active health club in the North of England some years ago and on the day we were due to open, the whole place burned down. It was a huge setback, but the team managed to rebuild it. Some years later I was in the bath when I got a call from Nelson Mandela. He told me the largest health club chain in South Africa was going bust, with 4,000 people about to be out of work. He asked me to get on

the next plane out there and save them, which I did!

'Virgin Active is now the second biggest health club chain in the world and the South Africa clubs are among our most successful.'

With all that Richard has achieved, he'd be forgiven for taking his foot off the pedal a little to sit back and enjoy life.

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But despite moving from London to Necker, his private island in the British Virgin Isles, not much has changed. 'I reached my 60s and thought that if I was going to be around for another 30 years, I needed to be in a place where I could play just as hard as I worked. It's fantastic there; I wake up in the morning, kite surf, play tennis, swim, then

RICHARD'S FORMULA FOR INNOVATION



'WHEN THERE ARE DRASTIC CHANGES IN OUR LIVES, THERE IS OFTEN A NATURAL URGE TO MAKE A DRASTIC SHIFT'

work hard. It's the perfect balance – I think you have to find a balance otherwise your body falls apart and you won't be able to carry on working hard.' An avid believer of Happy Body, Happy Mind, Richard credits his physically

active lifestyle with keeping him mentally agile.

'The key to staying sharp is to make sure that your body is healthy,' he says. 'I love the rush of endorphins, it's the most wonderful feeling, but it's so easy to let things slide. Last year I completed an eight day hike across the Swiss mountains, a 2,500km bike ride from there to Italy, a swim to Sicily, a marathon, and finally a climb up Mount Etna. It took us a month and when I finished, I felt as fit as a 25 year-old!

'I remember thinking I'd never let that level of fitness go, but of course it's unrealistic to keep it up to the same extent.'

LIFE FORCE

But with the launch of Virgin Sport this year, Richard will soon be back on the treadmill, and it seems he's not going to be stepping off of it anytime soon, literally or figuratively.

'Life is not a journey to retirement,' he says. 'I'm a big advocate that throughout life there will always be a need for smart rebalancing. When there are drastic changes in our lives, there is often a natural urge to make a drastic shift. However, rebalancing can have a more positive effect. There is nothing wrong with people retiring, but it isn't for everyone. I'll never retire. I'll continue to rebalance my life to make sure I can keep paying attention to the people and things I love.' **B**

*For more on Virgin Sport, visit uk.virgin sport.com. The second volume of Sir Richard Branson's autobiography, *Finding My Virginity*, is published by Virgin Books on 5 October.*